

Intentional Parenting Conversations

WEEK 3 / PRUNING / DISCIPLINE AND PATIENT INSTRUCTION AS A DISCIPLE

[INTRO]

Welcome.

Settle for a moment.

Take a deep breath in and slowly let it out.

As some of us are just transitioning from bedtimes, dishes, work, hard conversations, let's settle in to this time....

As we have done each week, here is a reminder:

In our parenting...

We cannot fully take the blame or the credit.

God gives the growth.

In your parenting you cannot fully take the blame or the credit.

God gives the growth.

OK, week three.

We are now half way into our time together.
We are continuing to work with this cultivation
approach to parenting...

And this week we talk about Pruning
— Discipline and Patient Instruction as Disciples.

Now the image I want to work with in tonight's
discussion comes from caring for tomato plants.

Have you all tried growing tomatoes before? Show of
hands...

OK. So there are some experienced tomato growers
among us.

Well when you are growing tomatoes, it's important to
prune what are endearingly known as "suckers."

Suckers are shoots that grow in the V-Shape between
two stems.

And if left untended, they grow into another stem. And
they are often pruned to focus the plant's energy on
fruit production. They are called SUCKERS because

they SUCK the plant's resources and energy away from fruitful development.

Removing SUCKERS has numerous benefits:

- Improving air circulation so the whole plant breathes better,
- Reducing disease risks, and
- Resulting in larger, better-quality fruit.

And get this: they are best removed (or "pinched") when small, using fingers or sharp pruners. They don't harm the plant especially when you catch these things early. Pruning helps the plant grow and bear fruit.

So—

What are the patterns in our children's lives that are "suckers"?

What is drawing away energy from what will produce fruit in their lives?

What is drawing energy away from what is fruitful in your family's life together? And... as best as you can tell, in the broader communities you are in?

Sit with that question for a moment.

What are these suckers in our lives?

Well, I think James Baldwin is right on the money when he says this—

“Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitated them.”

Ha here’s what I take that to mean:

We are always learning to discipline our children as disciples.

We can only learn to be attentive to our child’s lives by learning to be attentive to our own lives.

We can only spot the suckers in our children’s lives if we are learning to spot the habits that draw our energy, our focus, our vitality—

Phone usage,

Overworking,

Perfectionism,

Grasping for stuff that promises to make your life better but leaves you with less money and less attention,

Escaping into obsessions...

What is it for you?

Seasonally, Lent is a time of pruning.

Pruning the suckers **so that**

the resurrection life of Christ, life to the full,
may abound

not just for us but also for the sake of others.

So as we begin tonight, I want to pray Psalm 139 over us. The words may be familiar, allow these to be your words, your prayer to God:

*"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting"*

Lord, we invite your loving care into our lives.
Tend to us. Show us how to submit ourselves to your pruning that we would bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control.

Prune our jealousy, anger, lusts, and discontent.

With David's words, we ask—

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.*

[CONVERSATIONAL COMMITMENTS]

OK, as we come into a conversation about discipline, I want to remind us of our conversational commitments

There are two: the first is charity.

The author and pastor Eugene Peterson in a parenting book we have been really enjoying writes,

“When I observe the families where parents seem to be doing a good job of living the Christian faith in relation to their children, it is readily apparent that actual practices vary widely. Particular rules, techniques of discipline, variations in strictness and permissiveness—they run the gamut. One thing stands out: these parents seriously, honestly, joyfully follow the way of Christ themselves.”

We are seeking to have this conversation with a similar **charity** to what Peterson describes here.

We'll approach conversations with the assumption that every member of the group has Christ for their Shepherd, and is sincerely following Jesus as a brother or sister for whom Christ has laid down his life. And God is at work in their life.

So charity is a conversational commitment,
and the second is curiosity:

When someone in a group shares, it can be our tendency to respond with advice. Giving advice relieves tension for the listener more often than it does for the one who shared. So when you feel ready to say something in response to what someone has shared, try asking yourself:

How would I ask this as a question?

Something I often ask my kids very often is
“How would you ask that as a question?”

I think these commitments are especially relevant to our conversation today since there are likely very diverse experiences and perspectives on discipline represented in our histories of being parented and also in our practices of parenting.

[REVIEW: PARENTING GOAL + VALUES]

OK— so as we come into a conversation on discipline, I want us to remember that our practice of discipline serves our overall goal in parenting and will be an expression of our values.

So you may remember in

Week 1 | We did some Soil Work:

We asked the question

What Do We Want to See Grow?

We invited you to imagine your child 20 years from now and who do you hope they have become?

How does your own experiences of being parented shape that vision? How are you reacting from those experiences or carrying some of the good ones forward?

How is our vision aligned with God's vision for our children?

And we spent some time drafting a goal and values list for our parenting.

Before we go further in this week's conversation, I want us to take three minutes.

You can do some editing if you want.
Revisit any notes and if you have a spouse with you, talk about it and try to agree on a draft of your goal and a set of values that you can share in the chat.

After three minutes, I will invite you to share your goal and values for your parenting in the chat. We'll do this waterfall style, I'll count us down and then we'll hit post at the same time together.

And if you don't know what to put, that's OK,
If don't have your own words yet,
I think The SHEMA or Jesus Creed is a great goal that envisions us holistically loving God and our neighbor as ourself.

Love God with all your heart soul might.
Love Neighbor as yourself.

And for values — these are the things you are willing to sacrifice a lot for.

And hopefully at this point your values are aligning with your goal.

Or this could be a good time to wonder—

do they and how so or how not?

So any questions about what we're doing?

OK, three minutes. Go ahead and revisit your goal and values for your parenting.

We're now going to type into the chat our goal and values. And 3 2 1, post.

[REVIEW: PRACTICING ENCOURAGEMENT]

Now I want us to recall last week's session
And how Suzanne led us in discussing
Encouragement and Blessing, specifically receiving
encouragement in our fears and speaking
encouragement into our children's fears.

We are going to go to breakout rooms in a moment—
Did you try something this week to encourage your
child?

Did you receive some encouragement this week?

Did you find yourself speaking a promise of God to
encourage your child this week? If so, which? How'd it
go?

We're going to go to breakout rooms for 10 minutes to discuss and then come back together.

[GO TO BREAK OUTS]

Can we get a representative from each group to share?

[THE ENCOURAGEMENT:DISCIPLINE RATIO]

OK, Thanks y'all. I think having our goals and values and having encouragement top of mind is a helpful set up for today's topic.

Because as Suzanne said last week, encouragement has a positive corrective dynamic in our child's life. Encouragement and blessing build the connection that will be a base for any fruitful discipline we hope to offer our kids.

Research recommends a 4 to 1 ratio of encouragement to discipline in the workplace,
A 5 to 1 ratio in educational or parenting settings
And an 8 to 1 ratio for more high sensitivity kids with greater shame sensitivities.

So for every one negative interaction, criticism, or disciplinary action, there are at least four to five positive comments, praises, or moments of affection and connection. are recommended to maintain motivation and healthy relationships, whether in parenting, education, or business.

Now that feels high when I reflect on my own parenting. And I think many of us would say the same thing.

And it's hard when we're juggling cooking, cleaning, working, parenting — to not simply tend to the NO's and DON'Ts. It's hard and that's why its helpful to be doing this together in community. But it doesn't take long if you have this ratio reverse to develop a detached connection with your child. And diminishing returns of the discipline you do exercise has less and less effect.

That's why we've emphasized so far the importance of nourishment from encouragement before getting to the pruning aspects of discipline.

Offering 5 encouragements or blessings for every 1 warning or admonition helps counteract the natural human tendency to be fear based in our thinking and

angry in our reactions. Anger is often a fear of losing control.

So if our parenting goal for instance is a whole hearted love of God and neighbors as ourselves, there are inherent risks to that and fear would keep us from it, or at least from doing it very freely or wisely.

So as we get into this space of talking about discipline I want to situate the conversation of pruning in the imperative to do the fertilizer work, the nutrient rich work of encouragement and blessing allows for a base of trust and connection. We will struggle to discipline meaningfully without the base of trust and connection.

[FROM CONTROL TO CREATIVITY IN PARENTING]

One illustration of this. I was talking to some of you about this earlier this week.

In World War II, parents tried to create a normal environment for their children. Though parents in London were well aware of the bomb threat, they didn't allow their fear to permeate the culture of their homes, makeshift as they were. The parents didn't

dump their fears on their kids, but gave them experiences that one day would allow them to metabolize their fear in a healthy and non-controlling way. They were given an experience of goodness in the midst of a situation where goodness and normalcy felt scarce. They found creative ways for play and education and non-anxious times to be together.

Parenting is inherently creative.

We are co-creating an experience with God for our kids to develop and flourish.

But — But... when our child smacks us in the face.
When we're tired and it's been a long day and
bedtime antics are reaching the hour mark,
When we're being directly defied when we're trying to
help....

We move so quickly from cultivation to confrontation.

Our survival instincts kick in and we move into
controlling our kids' behavior. That's not discipline.
And that's why we need habits that help interrupt bad
instincts of control and anger and build new patterns
of love and discipleship for our own hearts and our
kids' hearts.

I think discipline is probably the hardest work we do as parents and so I want to encourage you as one learner to another here. I still have much to learn and am on a journey too. One of the most helpful things I've encountered on my journey is Justin Earley's description of discipline in Habits of the Household.

I want to read an excerpt from the book and also share two things:

1. One is natural but unhelpful instincts we have.
2. The second thing I want to share is a list of habits that counter those unhelpful instincts.

Again there is more here to dig into later, I will share my notes and some PDFs with you but for now just listen and let God put a highlighter on anything fruitful you hear.

Justin describes a scene in which his son starts repeatedly smacking him in the face.

He writes—

I know exactly what I want to do in these moments. I want to find a way to control the situation.

What I don't want to do is the real work of parenting. I don't want to stop everything and do the work of understanding the fullness of my child's humanity, act and speak in an age-relevant way to engage his heart and mind, and try to balance the delicate mix of firm authority and gentle compassion that it takes to disciple this child toward love and reconciliation.

I would much rather manage this behavior in a way that's convenient for me, and I have a lot of tools that work pretty quickly for that: anger, physical force, sugar bribes, volume, false threats involving counting to three, cold shoulders, and more.

But all of these are mostly designed for me to regain control of the moment.

Hence the problem: moments of discipline are so hard because there is such a wide gap between what I want and what they need.

What I want is control. What they need is loving, engaged discipline. And discipline is not a tool for controlling behavior.

It is a process of discipling a child's heart toward the right loves. A tall order for a Tuesday evening at 6:02 p.m., when my face still stings. But this is the radical

job of a parent, to take the ordinary moments of discipline and stitch them into a life of discipleship.

Discipline as Discipleship in the Story of God

The story of God and his people is one long story of raucous misbehavior.

If you ever get embarrassed about the problems in your family, just read the Bible. If you need more, take a skim through church history. We can tend to forget that the Old Testament is far too violent and sexual for TV, that Paul's letters dealt with many behaviors that were absolutely scandalous, and that the church throughout history has been just as marked by its moral failure as it has by its good deeds. When we say that "God so loved the world," it helps to remember that we are talking about the real world—the world of misbehaving people like you, me, and our kids.

And yet we also know from the story of the Bible that the dominant theme is not our misbehavior but God's love in spite of our misbehavior. Yes, we are fallen, broken, and depraved.

but that's only one piece of the plot-line. The far more important piece is that God loves fallen, broken, and depraved people.

So much so that he sacrificed everything to love them out of their brokenness and into his fullness. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son."

God's response to our misbehavior is to love us back into relationship, no matter the personal cost to him. Picture it like this: the biblical movement of discipline begins in love (creation), moves through human misbehavior (fall), continues through God's sacrifice in response to that misbehavior (redemption), and then calls us to action and ends in love and reconciliation again (reconciliation or re-creation).

The plot-line of the story of God is entirely shaped by the discipline of God, and that is a good thing, because that means it takes the shape of his love. Hebrews sums it up perfectly: "the Lord disciplines the one he loves." And this loving discipline of the heavenly father is what creates disciples who in turn love others like he loved us." You do not need a degree in linguistics to see the root connection between discipline and discipleship. God's discipline is the process that creates God's disciples.

This is profoundly relevant to the task of the parent. We shouldn't be surprised that the stories of our homes are constantly shaped by moments of discipline. If we love our children, then we will find ourselves faced over and over with the task of *disciplining* our children through discipline, **not as a means of controlling their behavior for our convenience** but rather **as a means of stewarding their hearts toward loving God and loving others as themselves**. This is why discipline is both the highest call and the hardest thing we do as parents.

And it's hard in part because of our instincts. And we need habits that help counteract our instincts.

If discipline were easy, we wouldn't need to talk about practicing habits to guide us. We would just spontaneously respond with the right reaction. We need habits that help us practice discipline as discipleship because, frankly, we have all the wrong instincts. Discipline never happens at a moment of convenience. We are always too tired, or running late, or pulled in different directions, or something else. Even worse, depending on your upbringing and the harm that may have been done to you under the

guise of discipline, you may carry an awful lot of awful baggage into these moments.

The first step in moving toward habits of discipline that help us disciple our children in these moments is trying to understand some of these problematic instincts we all go to.

INSTINCTS IN MOMENTS OF DISCIPLINE	
What We Think	"They are doing this on purpose."
Our Reaction	Anger directed at them
Our Mistake	This is an overdeveloped view of their fallenness. Our children are sinful fools in the most Proverbial sense of the term, yes, but they are also image-bearers in need of <i>discipleship</i> . In our exhaustion, we may think that their repeated disobedience is a personal assault intended to keep us from ever being happy. Fight against that lie.

What We Think	"This is an insult to me personally."
Our Reaction	Bitterness and revenge
Our Mistake	Our own selfishness can cause us to interpret childish behavior as a targeted attack—it is another version of thinking the world is all about us. At worst, this can lead toward blaming, shaming, and revenge. But it is so important in moments of discipline not to focus on our offense or inconvenience but on the opportunity of <i>discipleship</i> for them.
What We Think	"There's nothing wrong; they meant the best."
Our Reaction	Dismiss and ignore
Our Mistake	This is an overdeveloped view of innocence and an underdeveloped view of their fallenness. It is how we may be tempted to react, for example, when our child hurts someone else's child. We want to protect ourselves from the embarrassment of the reality that they harmed someone, so we dismiss it as just a mistake, even though our children unfortunately do intentionally hurt others, and that needs to be addressed and <i>disciplined</i> , not ignored and dismissed.

What We Think	"They just misunderstood; they can be reasoned with. The problem is education."
Our Reaction	Useless words
Our Mistake	With young children in particular, this is an underdeveloped view of fallenness and also a major misunderstanding of child development. Their upstairs brain that deals with logic and rationality <i>is not ready for a speech, especially in a crisis moment</i> . ⁵ This means that we can waste opportunities for <i>discipling</i> young children by talking when we should be using body language and tone to help them <i>feel</i> the truth of what they cannot understand in words. ⁶ This certainly changes as kids get older, but not as much as we may think. Connecting with an older child emotionally, before you connect with them logically, is often the route that healing and reconciliation require. If we skip that and go straight to a speech, we're usually just talking to hear ourselves talk.

What We Think	"I want them to feel pain and shame for what they've done. Then they'll learn."
Our Reaction	Revenge or abuse
Our Mistake	Whether in the form of a physical retaliation or verbal retaliation, when we lash out at children to make them hurt for what they did, we are <i>acting like children right at the moment when what they need is a parent</i> . Remember that the biblical concept of discipline begins and ends with God's love, <i>not with his anger</i> . Physical and emotional consequences may have a useful place as tools of discipline, but they are never to be vents for our own anger. When they do come, they need to come <i>after</i> we have done the work to manage our own anger and frustration.
What We Think	"I am frustrated and exhausted; I need to assert control to get the right result as fast as possible."
Our Reaction	Impatient behavior management
Our Mistake	This is an underdeveloped view of discipline. Discipline is not so we can get convenient behavior and have an easier life. It is to <i>disciple</i> the hearts of our children toward right loves. When discipline is just a way to gain control of the moment, we sacrifice momentary control for the real heart of parenting—the succession of <i>discipleship</i> moments, which over time form hearts in the love of God.
What We Think	"I could do this right if it weren't at this moment. This moment is really inconvenient."
Our Reaction	Abdication of the role of parent
Our Mistake	There is never an easy moment to discipline. That is not because of circumstance, it is because discipline is not easy. Ever. It is crucial to understand that our child's discipline is also about our own discipline. Part of our formation in parenting is learning that we <i>don't get a choice on when to drop everything and attend to our kids</i> . When we punt on discipline simply because it's inconvenient, we punt on the calling to be a parent.

What We Think	"I am embarrassed and I need to manage my reputation here."
Our Reaction	Self-conscious behavior management
Our Mistake	Discipline is not about managing our children's behavior as a means to manage our own identity. But this is often our temptation, especially in public, and it is another inversion of discipline—we make it about us instead of them. Whether at the grocery store or a backyard gathering, we need to make sure the way we are responding to our children is not out of a fear of managing our identity in the moment but is about doing what our children need in that moment.

Now what are some habits that counter-act these instincts? Justin lists 8 of them:

1. Establish Loving Authority

Lead with authority rooted in love and connection, not mere control.

2. Pause Before Responding

Take a breath or brief prayer before reacting to prevent instinct-driven responses.

3. Pray and Self-Talk

Address your own heart; recognize God may be discipling you as well.

4. Use Body Language & Calm Presence

Eye contact, calm tone, and gentle touch communicate connection before correction.

5. Seek Understanding

Ask why the child acted this way; help them reflect on intentions and motives.

6. Apply Consequences Thoughtfully

Consequences should be relevant to behavior and designed to teach, not punish arbitrarily.

7. Insist on Confession & Apology

Help children acknowledge their actions and commit to change.

8. Always End in Reconciliation

Restore the relationship before ending discipline; use affection, playful touch, and signals of love.

I think this is very helpful language
To describe

How we naturally respond.

and

How we want to learn to respond by habit.

Proverbs talks about discipline and correction as life saving. And it is. Foolishness leads to death. That is the context of discipline discussions in proverbs. They are about preventing further harm and stopping a slide into foolish living. Stopping the suckers, if you will, from causing disease and poor growth throughout the plant, drawing away the energy that leads to fruitfulness.

We are asked to respond to this.

And I think these habits, based on the biblical storyline, are really insightful in practice.

What about you— let's discuss in groups if there was something that jumped out to you about two things:

1. How you naturally respond? What instincts stood out to you?

2. Then how you want to respond? What habit do you feel like OH yes, that. I need more of that.

Small group discuss...

[WORK THIS WEEK: ID SUCKERS]

So we just covered:

How we naturally, instinctively respond in discipline moments.

We also covered

How we want to learn to respond by habit.

Now:

What you want to respond to?

What is the criteria that you want to be disciplined in attending to?

What is the foolishness you want to see pruned before it grows into a more damaging situation:

What is on your list? If you have a spouse try to answer first and then compare notes. Some examples:

Disrespect
Lying
Meanness
Not listening right away
Defiance

This is the take away for this segment.

—

[NOTES ON SPANKING + FOOLISHNESS]

If it comes up or is helpful to address...

In Proverbs the discipline of “the rod” doesn’t have to mean a prescription for corporeal punishment that some make it out to be. Physical spanking was viewed at one point as a ‘shibboleth’ for parents who took the Scripture seriously. This is not necessary to have a biblical framework for your parenting and a high regard for discipline.

For more on this William Webb is very helpful. He argues the Bible addressed discipline in a culture

where corporal punishment was normal, but Scripture consistently moves toward greater dignity, gentleness, and care. Webb argues that when we follow the trajectory of the Bible, we see movement toward:

- Greater dignity for vulnerable people
- Increasing restraint of violence
- The model of Christlike love and gentleness

“Rod” language may function as a symbol for authority, guidance, or correction, not necessarily physical reprimands.

[WISDOM LITERATURE]

It is good to see Proverbs in the broader wisdom literature. Proverbs functions to give general wisdom observations, not strict formulas. Ecclesiastes is a helpful compliment. Proverbs seems to say your pain makes sense: do good and you feel good, do bad and you feel bad. But Ecclesiastes seems to say I tried it all and nothing matters but God. It's almost like they are written for different life stages with experience.

[FOOLISHNESS]

The context for “the rod” is important to consider. The context is to prevent further harm as a result of

foolishness and always intended to be loving warning against foolishness, not an outlet for parental anger. Anger outbursts that get expressed in physical reprimands are not in view in the wisdom literature. If that has been a part of your parenting and no apology has been offered, that is worth exploring to address some of the longer term effects. Apology can function as an antidote.

Dan Allender writes helpfully about how to respond when we are trying to love someone who is behaving especially in a foolish way.

Fools in Bold Love:

1. Naïve or Unformed Behavior

Description

Lacks awareness or maturity.

Doesn't yet see consequences.

Open to learning when shown a better way.

Examples

Poor decisions because they don't know better.

Missing obvious relational cues.

Repeating mistakes out of immaturity.

Helpful response

Teaching

Clarifying consequences

Patient guidance

Modeling wisdom

Pastoral language

“This looks like a moment for growth and learning.”

2. Defensive or Resistant Behavior

Description

Knows better but resists correction.

Becomes defensive, blames others, or rationalizes.

Repeats harmful patterns despite feedback.

Examples

Making excuses instead of owning mistakes

Ignoring wise counsel

Minimizing harm done to others

Helpful response

Clear confrontation

Naming the behavior directly

Setting consequences

Stopping the rescue cycle

Pastoral language

“This pattern resists correction and needs clearer boundaries.”

3. Contemptuous or Undermining Behavior

Description

Actively attacks correction or truth.

Uses sarcasm, contempt, manipulation, or ridicule.

Creates relational damage for others.

Examples

Mocking others' concerns

Shaming people who speak up

Manipulating conversations to maintain power

Helpful response

Strong boundaries

Protecting others from harm

Limiting influence

Sometimes stepping away from engagement

Pastoral language

"This behavior undermines trust and harms the community."